

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

A Lesson in Humility: Traveling with Beau

Author's Note: This is the fourth in a series of stories reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau.^{1,2,3} During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
October 17, 2014

Day Four (Grand Forks, North Dakota)

The day started fine: rising at 5:45, vigorous one-hour walk, shower, light breakfast and on the road by 8:00am. However--as I did not fully realize until much later in the day--I was exhausted. Having spent 45 of the preceding 70 hours on the road, and with the euphoria of embarking on our long-anticipated journey now over, I would soon realize that the three long days of driving was taking a huge toll on me. For Beau, the toll was even greater.

As had become our custom, we took time to explore the community that we had entered in the darkness of the preceding night. We drove to the campus of the University of North Dakota with modern but rugged buildings and attractive landscape. We marveled at the immense hockey arena, audaciously sited on spacious real estate in what appeared to be a high-rent area of campus. I had read about Ralph Engelstad's \$100 million gift--unrestricted, it was said--that allowed the construction of the massive and luxurious hockey arena with the "Fighting Sioux" Warrior statue at its entrance.

In what I consider symbolic of one of the flagrances of university philanthropy, the diminutive Biomedical Science Research Institute sat across the parking lot from the sports arena, its aged and dowdy brick shell a stark contrast to the mega-donor's hockey palace a hundred yards away.

I perceived a touch of insecurity because the campus had a string of street names suggesting an affinity for the Ivies: Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, Cambridge, Cornell. The monstrous hockey arena was located on Columbia Street, somewhat ironic, I thought, considering that its namesake Ivy doesn't have a hockey team.



The hockey arena at University of North Dakota
Photo by the author, 2007

As we headed west on Highway 2, the morning sun was obscured by a dingy haze from the smoke of distant forest and grass fires to the north and the south. About 11:00 am I began to realize that Beau was not himself. Rather than curling up beside me and going to sleep as was his custom, he would not relax. He lay quietly for short at a time, then would rise, look anxiously at me, circle two or three times, and collapse onto the passenger seat with a gut-wrenching sigh. He would remain settled for one, perhaps two minutes, then rise again and repeat the sequence: rising awkwardly, anxiously looking at me, circling, collapsing with a sigh.

Something seemed to be terribly wrong.

This behavior was only part of my concern: in addition, he had not been eating. Traveling through Ontario two days earlier, he had consumed very little of his kibble, though at the time I had attributed that to his excitement of the journey and the distraction of being away from home. I had tempted him by softening the dry food with gravy from canned food purchased at a convenience store in western Michigan. But now he was refusing all food completely.

In early afternoon, we stopped for a long break at Devil's Lake, the midpoint between Grand Forks and Minot. We had driven only 100 miles of our anticipated 500-mile day. I was so concerned about his anorexia that we stopped at a supermarket and picked up a roast chicken just off the spit, some cheddar cheese and fresh water from the cooler. Trotting back to the jeep, Beau caught the poultry aroma through the plastic bag before I could even toss it into the back of the jeep. He could barely contain his excitement as we drove the few hundred yards to a grassy area where I laid out our picnic blanket. I fed him sparingly, but he ate it ravenously and relieved his bowels before we fastened our respective seat belts and once again headed west.

What gratification I felt from Beau's dramatic lunchtime recovery was short-lived. No sooner were we back on the smoky road than he returned to his restless rising, circling, collapsing, sighing. Neither reassuring chatter nor my caressing quelled his mounting anxiety as we stuttered across the prairie at an appallingly slow rate. For the only time during our trip, I seriously considered aborting the journey.

We reached the small town called Rugby two hours after lunch and I took Beau for a long walk in the vicinity of the monument designating the "Geographic Center of North America." I marveled that someone would ostensibly calculate the distance from the northern tip of Ellesmere Island in Canada's Arctic to the junction of Mexico and Guatemala in the south, and from the western tip of the Aleutian Island chain to St. John's, Newfoundland in the east. Beau's restlessness had created the special circumstance by which I found myself stopping to witness this obscure monument. It was another of those beautiful examples of what one sees when you take the *road less traveled*. I never would have known of the monument's existence had I sped across the prairie on I-94 one hundred miles to the south.



Geographic Center of North America, Rugby, North Dakota
Photo by the author, 2007

We arrived at Minot, the train capital of North Dakota, at 4:00 pm. Beau's deterioration had reached the point where I decided to stop for the night. We found a quiet motel on an isolated road on the southeast corner of the city. As remote from activity as possible, I collapsed on the bed from fatigue. Beau crawled up beside me and rested his head on my chest with his muzzle

almost touching my jaw. He fell into a deep sleep, unmoving until dusk descended hours later. I slept soundly too, the first time in four days.

Just before midnight, we had a brief walk so Beau could relieve himself, then we crawled back into bed. No dinner. Though we had traveled only 30% of our anticipated route, the break proved critical. We were not turning back! Tomorrow we would be in Canada and in four or maybe five days, Alaska.

What was our worst day became the turning point in my experience of traveling with Beau. I got a dose of humility and common sense in a manner that I had not experienced in the preceding ten years as chief executive of a major veterinary college.

Sometimes the greatest lessons in life come from the most humble circumstances, or from your dog, or both.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 9, 2014.

² Smith, Donald F. Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 11, 2014.

³ Smith, Donald F. From Ontario to Wisconsin: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 16, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Human-animal bond
One Health
Traveling with a dog

TOPICS:

One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

Where is the geographic center of North America?

META-SUMMARY:

The author continues his journey across America with his dog across North Dakota.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.